

THE "OLD MILISH"

When Starks "Stalwarts" and Byron "Bears" Met for Their May Training

By HOLMAN DAY

Illustrations by Harry A. Linnell

IN column of fours, eyes ahead, muskets right-shoulder, smut-foot to the fore of clean-foot, we were ready to march to the muster-ground—the Starks Stalwarts were. May training-day, and the rising sun behind the Union meeting-house like Alexander's golden shield set on its edge away on the top of Emery Hill.

Liberty Evans pooched out his waiting lip over the blow-hole of his life, his mustache's hairs sticking up like spines on a quill-pig.

Alexander Strout slid his thumb under his shoulder-strap to settle his snare-drum in front of him, rolled his quid into his cheek, and pointed the little knobs of his drumsticks at each other.

Seth Burkett scurged "Old Tunket" higher up on his stomach, gripped his swell-headed pestle and stuck his arm out full length, ready to lambaste the bull's-hide. "Old Tunket" was our bass-drum, and it had two fat, round, red faces painted on it, the full size of each end.

Captain Mose Britt stood in front of us, slowly opening his mouth. At times like that I always felt a squidgy feeling run up and down my backbone. "One-two! One-two!" he rasped. We began to mark time "like mules going up a flight of stairs," as old Joe Levett used to remark.

Captain Mose Britt! Why, say! Captain Mose Britt of the Starks Stalwarts Militia, when he had put on his white pants, his yellow weskit, his green baize coat, his stove-funnel cap with its red pompon, and had buckled on his sword and had thrown back his shoulders—well, he felt better than old Julius Caesar ever felt—and as for looks, Caesar in that tin hat of his and his bobbed-off petticoat couldn't touch him. Mother Ann Britt made his uniform, the same as the mothers and sisters and other women folks of the Starks Stalwarts built uniforms for the rest of us.

And when time rolled around to that May training-day and we met in front of old Dawson's store in the village square and fell into line and held up our chins and marked time, the sight of us would have done good to the souls of N. Bonaparte and the ancient heroes. Sheet of molasses gingerbread in each knapsack, each canteen filled with new Medford rum, patriotism swelling inside us and fairly snorting out of our noses like escaping steam—we were ready for the word.

Captain Mose Britt had been sawyer in Durgin's sawmill for more than ten years—and when a man has had to holler down the yawp of a gang-saw every time he converses, his tones get in time to be pretty middling full. Captain Mose was so robustious even in ordinary conversation outside the mill that his mother wore cotton-batting in her ears for protection. He could sit on his front porch and chat with anyone in the village without pushing his voice much above his usual pitch. When

he stood in front of us that morning, cocked his elbows at right angles and hollered: "Ten-shun! Fow-wud! M-u-c-h!" well, we marched.

And he took two steps backward, twirled round on his heel stiff as a peg—and then—whee-te-who, ker-boomp, te-ooodle! we got the music. It was always the same tune that we marched out of Starks with—heads in all the windows to watch us; and that tune seemed to sing this over and over to me in words:

He-e-re wek-kum from old Stark's—Light—house.

He-e-re we are with Cap Mose Britt!

He-a-ds right up and follow your—lead—ah, He's the chap to give—ye—grit!

I'll have to say one word about "Stark's Lighthouse" right now. Starks is more than two hundred miles inland from the ocean, but Captain Mose Britt's grandfather allowed as how he'd

had a revelation that there was going to be an almighty upheaval of nature, and that Starks would be left on the shore-line of the Atlantic Ocean, and so he went to work and put every dollar he had into a lighthouse on the top of Devil's Nob in his pasture, saying it was for speculation and that it would fetch a big price from the Government some day. Folks advised Mose's father to put the old man under guardianship; but he let on that the Britt family had always earned its own money and could spend it as members of said family saw fit. That's just as stuffy as the Britt are. For most ten years the crazy old coot spent all his spare time sitting up atop his lighthouse, waiting for the Atlantic Ocean to come and call on him, and then he either fell off or jumped off, and left the Britt family the lighthouse and a mortgage on the old home farm—and nothing else. And then the people across the river in the town of Byron stuck the name of "Stark's Lighthouse" onto our town, so as to nag us.

As for us, we have always called the folks of Byron "Tickingites" because old Cass Cole, who used to be a Byron selectman, wore trousers made of striped bed-ticking up to the day he died. And as those names are not especially relished by the possessors, Byron hates the memory of old Cole, and we aren't any too pleased that Lem Britt picked out our town to be born in and to operate in. But I must own up that each one of the old sires left a grandson behind that has sort of made

up for past mistakes and errors of judgment. We all know that Mose Britt was always all right, and being a fair man, I'm willing to admit that Sile Cole was too.

When we wheeled into the muster-ground at Eustis that forenoon, after a ten-mile march, the Byron Bears, Captain Sile Cole ahead, were just coming down their cross-road, and the two companies almost bumped each other. We wanted to bump each other. To want to fight Tickingites when we saw 'em was as natural as it is for bulldogs to growl and tackle. In those days, every boy in Starks and Byron, as soon as he was big enough to go in swimming in the river, shouted insult and contumely across the silver tide. Between the two shores there was a debatable island about as big as a flapjack that the larger boys of Starks and Byron met upon and fought over and took and lost and retook, year after year. Our grandfathers used to do that. And when we got to be grown-ups the old spite

stayed in us, ready to roil like mud at the bottom of a cup, at the look or word.

But we noticed something especially ferocious about the looks of Captain Mose Britt and Captain Sile Cole that morning. The moment they came in sight of each other at the head of their commands they began to chew their lips and scowl.

"Any shipwrecks in Starks last night, Cap'n Mose Britt?" hollered Captain Sile Cole, the corner of his lip cocked up in a sneer.

"Yes, a schooner loaded with bed-ticking, all of which was consigned to Tailor Snip Peter in your town for pants' patterns. Cap'n Sile Cole."

Then our music struck up, "Here We Come From Old Starks Lighthouse," and theirs, "Bought 'Em in Byron, Hooray-Hooray!"—as we always translated their tune, and both companies marched onto the muster-ground, shouldering and elbowing each other and growing madder every minute, as you might say, singing our little chorus to the key our Captains had pitched.

The usual program at May training was for Starks to keep away from Byron, and Byron to keep away from Starks. We had always realized what would probably happen. All the farmer folk of old Somerset County came to May training to have a good time, and mixing hell-fire and gunpowder under their noses wouldn't have been the proper way of making them merry on a sunny occasion. But that day Captain Mose Britt and Captain Sile Cole, gritting their teeth and bristling like bull pups seemed to want to bump.

We of the old milish were taught always to feel just as our Captains felt, that being a military duty. We all gritted our teeth and scowled on general principles, trying to get into the spirit of the occasion. I could see chaps that had licked me out on that island, and chaps that I had licked there could see me,



Captain Moses Britt—
Caesar Couldn't Touch Him



Captain Sile Cole, Bristol-
ling Like a Bull Pup



Liberty Evans Pooched
His Waiting Lip



Seth Burkett
Ready to Lambaste
the Bull's-Hide



Alexander Strout
Pointed His
Drumsticks